

Public Policy And The Science Foundation

By The Science Legislation Study Group,
Washington Association of Scientists

NOT SINCE the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 has there arisen scientific legislation as important as the proposed National Science Act of 1949. Hearings on eight bills are scheduled by the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee on March 31, April 1 and 4.

Actually there are only three different bills, represented by H. R. 12, H. R. 359 and S. 247. They are the bills of the Seventy-ninth and Eightieth Congresses, without change. H. R. 359 is the same as the compromise bill reported to the Senate of the Seventy-ninth Congress. S. 247, recently passed by the Senate, and H. R. 12 are the Senate and House versions of almost identical bills introduced into the Eightieth Congress. They are slight modifications of the vetoed National Science Foundation Act of 1947 and are designed to meet the President's main objection.

AS RECOMMENDED by the Hoover Commission and the Steelman Report, the chief purposes of the National Science Foundation are:

1. To examine continuously the total scientific effort of the Nation.
2. To recommend a national science policy based on these surveys.
3. To assess the proper role of the Federal Government in this effort and to coordinate Government research programs.
4. To support basic research and education in the sciences.

None of the bills encompasses this entire scope. Without it, the National Science Foundation is in danger of becoming merely another fund-disbursing agency.

THE MAIN difference between the bills of the Seventy-ninth and Eightieth Congresses is in the form of administration. In H. R. 359 the foundation is headed by a full-time administrator assisted by a part-time advisory board. In H. R. 12 and S. 247, the foundation is headed by a group of 24 part-time members, assisted by a full-time director acting as chief executive officer.

Although they provide for presidential appointment of the director, the two bills still contain the serious defects mentioned by the President in his veto, in that they would "vest the determination of vital national policies, the expenditure of large public funds, and the administration of important governmental functions in a group of individuals who would be essentially private citizens. The proposed National Science Foundation would be divorced from control by the people to an extent that implies a distinct lack of faith in the democratic process...."

"The qualifications prescribed in the bill for members of the foundation would insure that most of them would be individuals employed by institutions or organizations eligible for grants... Moreover the organization prescribed in the bill is so complex and unwieldy that there is grave danger that it would impede rather than promote the Government's effort to encourage scientific research." Since the part-time foundation members would determine science policy and approve disbursement of public funds, without responsibility to any elected official, it is a foundation to nullify the integration of the

foundation into the governmental structure.

IN RESPECT to top administration, H. R. 359 is greatly superior to the other bills. It prescribes, however, a detailed sub-organization that may limit the effectiveness of the foundation. These details should be left to the discretion of the administrator. This principle should apply to the establishment of all divisions and special commissions.

Other differences in the bills of the Seventy-ninth and Eightieth Congresses involve provisions for the distribution of funds, patent rights, research in the field of atomic energy, military research and foreign policy.

H. R. 359 requires that part of the funds for research be distributed on a population and geographic basis, and that fellowships and scholarships be apportioned on a quota system among the States. The other bills instruct the foundation "to avoid undue concentration of such research and education" but do not assure scientific development of the areas of the Nation which are scientifically underdeveloped—one of the chief purposes of the foundation.

R. R. 359 requires that patent rights on Government-financed discoveries be freely assigned to the public. This provision, however, extends to all Government agencies, whereas it should be limited to the foundation. In H. R. 12 and S. 247 no policy is specified other than to "protect the public interest and the equities of the individual." This leaves the foundation to decide its patent policy and hence open to patent litigation which could seriously hinder its work.

H. R. 12 and S. 247 limit the support of research by the foundation in the field of atomic energy. If any limitations are necessary, they should relate only to work on fissionable materials, in order to be in accord with the Atomic Energy Act of 1946.

All of the bills provide for support of military research by the foundation. Since other legislation has provided for such research, it should be the general policy of the foundation not to give continuing support to research requiring security classification, but to have such research performed in Government laboratories, or sponsored by the appropriate military agency.

ALL OF the bills provide for international cooperation in furthering scientific activity. H. R. 12 and S. 247, however, couple this cooperation with the foreign policy of the United States. The search for objective knowledge should not be cast along national lines, as has been done by totalitarian states. International scientific cooperation should be effected through established international agencies such as UNESCO and other accredited international scientific organizations.

The need for a National Science Foundation remains urgent. We cannot delay longer without grave consequences to our national scientific position. In basic science and in training of scientific talent the war years were lost years. By providing the structure for a National Science Foundation in which the purposes are correctly implemented the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee of the Eighty-first Congress can make contributions to our future national life.